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ABSTRACT

The inclusion of Afro-American literature in high schools either as an elective course or as a unit within an American literature course provides opportunities for Black students to gain, from members of their own race, pride in themselves and belief in the possibility of personal achievement. Title selection should depend upon class make-up. For a predominately Black class, literature by articulate men of their own race should be read, whereas for a white class, such books as "Black Like Me" and "Huck Finn" can be included. Six of the best novels for a class in Afro-American literature are James Weldon Johnson's "Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man," Jean Toomer's "Cane," Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man," James Baldwin's "Go Tell It on the Mountain," Langston Hughes' "Not Without Laughter," and Richard Wright's "Native Son." Robert A. Bone's "The Negro Novel in America" can supply the teacher with background, insights, and a bibliography on the subject. (JM)

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Black Literature? Of Course!

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Why Black literature? We don't have Scotch, Irish, or Jewish lit courses in our high schools.

No, but our teachers (and as a result their students) know there are Bobby Burnses and Padraic Colums and Sholom Aleichems. Orientals are made aware of their old and rich literary and artistic heritage. But our students of African and Hispanic background know very little of the work of Black writers; even our Black and Hispanic teachers are apt to be more conversant with Shakespeare and Dryden than with Ralph Ellison or Mariano Azuela. When we have teaching staffs sufficiently knowledgeable to integrate these literatures at the high-school and college levels, we can leave specializing for the graduate school. Now we have a gap to fill. It is vital, in my opinion, to see that these great segments of our population gain pride in self and belief in the possibility of personal achievement from members of their race; otherwise civilization as we know it may not survive. In this article I will briefly consider Black literature only.

I recommend either a complete unit in Afro-American literature to be taught in the world and American lit courses or (preferably) an elective course in Afro-American literature.

The first problem is the course title. Much of your reference material will be under "Negro Literature." Many, many of the fine men about whom you will be studying lived all of their lives as "Negroes." The term was first replaced by the euphemistic "colored" and later by Afro-American and Black. At Manual High School we call our course Afro-American Literature; this appellation has no connotation of the "Uncle Tom" as does "Negro" nor of militancy as does "Black."

The second problem will be course content. There are many ramifications of Negro literature. There is literature written by white men about Black men, literature by Black people about Black people, and literature by Black people about characters who are white or raceless.

In my Afro-American lit classes I do not teach literature written by white men about Black men. Most of my students are Black, and they need to hear the words of the articulate men of their own race. If I were teaching a class of white students, I would probably include a few such books as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to illustrate the early colonial paternal literature—the good Black man is the loyal, grateful, happily ignorant Black man who loves his white master first, last, and always. This is, of course, the basis for the condemnatory term "Uncle Tom."

Among books by white authors I would certainly consider teaching to

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*Mrs. Geyer also has an article in the September issue of *The English Journal*, titled "Teaching Composition to the Disadvantaged."

a white class are *Black Like Me* by Griffin and *Huck Finn,* Twain's magnificent satire on (among other things) the relationship of white to Black. This relationship climaxes in the fantastic lines,

"Anybody hurt?"

"No'm. Killed a nigger."

The constant heavy satire might be too difficult to handle in any but accelerated classes for Black students.

The Confessions of Nat Turner by Styron would be another possible inclusion for white students if you challenged them to find out why Black people hate this book when it seems sympathetic to the Black man. This search might also be a good exercise in empathy for white teachers. Works by Booker T. Washington and about George Washington Carver are now suspect as "Uncle Tom" and might well be omitted.

As for "raceless" books by Black authors—perhaps in the millennium all writers of any color will be able to write as human beings writing about human beings. This is not the millennium. Special problems based on race are difficult to ignore by minority writers. This is not to say that Frank Yerby's Westerns are not good, solid Westerns, or that Willard Motley's *Knock on Any Door* is not an excellent novel, or that Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo* or the *Three Musketeers* should be drummed from the library. They are simply not pertinent in a class in Afro-American lit.

I also believe that strictly sociological treatises should be left to inclusion by the history department unless they have some literary value. I would include in the latter *The Autobiography of Malcolm X,* some of the essays of LeRoi Jones, and most of James Baldwin's essays in *The Fire Next Time.* These are excellent.

Perhaps I should apologize for making this article so personal and opinionated. During the sixteen years I have taught at Manual High School, the school has gone from an integrated one to a largely Black one. During that time I have taken an active interest in Black literature; I planned and have taught and will teach one of our Afro-American lit courses. When classes protest (and rightly) the color of my skin, I suggest that we work together—they supply the feelings of a black-skinned person in a predominantly white culture while I supply the literary know-how. I claim no other virtue but this experience and a sincere interest in young people and literature.

I add here the one title I think every teacher of literature might well read, and which every teacher of Afro-American literature *should* read. *The Negro Novel in America* by Robert A. Bone (a white man) (Yale, paperbound) can give you many insights and perceptions as well as an excellent bibliography. This is not a book for assignment to students, really, but it will give you an edge on the subject; if there is one paramount suggestion I might make it is: "Stay two jumps ahead of this class in literature if you usually get by with one."

In the chronological approach, you will find that the early Negro was encouraged to be religious (blessed are the meek) but was seldom taught to read or write; in fact, it was against the law to so teach him if you lived in the state of Virginia. As a result the earliest literature is folk tale and spirituals. Many of the spirituals were veiled references to the underground

and escape to the free North in such phrases as "cross over Jordan" or "the promised land." Most students, unfortunately, are familiar only with such fables as the Uncle Remus tales and not with folk tales done by Black writers such as "The Goophered Grape Vine" by Charles Chesnutt. There are several excellent paperback anthologies of short fiction, prose, and poetry. We use *Dark Symphony* (Emanuel and Gross, Macmillan), but there are other good ones.

The earliest published Negro novel was written by a fugitive slave and was published not in the United States but in England. At the time I read it there were only two copies available, one in the Library of Congress, the other in the Philadelphia Public Library. The writer, William Wells Brown, had been helped to escape and then taught to read and write by a Quaker family. This sect was most active in the underground at that time. Many of the themes of Negro literature are woven into this novel: the tragic mulatto, unable to choose which half of him he wants to live by, unable to brag of his prominent ancestor; white people going to prayer meeting past the jail where chained Negroes waited the Monday morning auction; the status of the house Negro above the field Negro. All these and many more are in *Clotel,* and if, as I understand, it is to be re-published, it would be well worth acquiring. Somewhat similar and more available is *The House Behind the Cedars* by Charles Chesnutt (Houghton Mifflin).

Most Negro literature—the plays, the novels, the essays, the poems—are strong; they are mature; they are not always pretty. They are very real. I do not believe in excerpting (emasculating) the literature we teach to young people. My contribution to "one of the things that is wrong with today's youth" is that English teachers have fed them "Milquetoast literature" with the result that instead of reading from books that might have been vital guides to how to feel about life, assignments have served merely to make students suspect their teachers don't know "where it's at!"

In my Afro-American literature class, for example, we read aloud together the play *Blues for Mr. Charlie* by James Baldwin. Two incidents are noteworthy. Four-letter words rang sonorous and angry through the room for about a week. We discussed why Baldwin used this language and how we as adults (and I consider high-school students adult) might react. The following week one of the girls used one of the pithier words in class. An accusing hum arose from the others.

"What's your problem?" I asked. "We must have heard that word fifty times last week."

"Yes," a boy retorted, "but *then* it was appropriate."

"Yeah."

"So O.K. I'm sorry." The girl's apology was clear and prompt and the incident was over. For about two minutes (or was it fifty-nine seconds?) I basked in a good feeling about my teaching.

What about parents? I can't answer for your school, but during the time we read *Blues for Mr. Charlie,* a boy came up and said, "My mother says that's a dirty book, and I want my money back."

I reached for my purse. "Sure." (I usually advance money for paperbacks—for a selfish reason. I may lose about three or four of the fifty bucks I lend, but it's much easier to teach when everybody has a book.)

He swung his copy out of my clutches. "Hey. You can't have it now. Mom hasn't finished reading it."

And that was the end of that incident.

On the other hand, summer before last in a "white" high school, a parent hauled me in to the principal's office for using the words "adultery" and "intercourse" during the discussion of *The Scarlet Letter.* Well, I'm still teaching. The conference with the parent helped all around—and the little girl admitted to be a fair critic. She said she deliberately toted the words home because *The Scarlet Letter* was too darned hard to read in hot weather—and she hoped to get out of it! The student who feels his teacher is sincerely exploring the way it is with him will usually protect that teacher from overanxious parents.

Perhaps the six best novels I have found for a high-school class in Afro-American literature are *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* by James Weldon Johnson, Jean Toomer's *Cane,* Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man,* James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain,* Langston Hughes' *Not Without Laughter,* and Richard Wright's *Native Son.* I'll comment briefly on these.

Johnson's fictional "autobiography" is the first novel about a Negro to contain a complex, fully developed character; it also introduces a theme you watch for in Negro fiction, a theme done as well here as anywhere. This is the trauma of the moment of discovery, the moment when a Negro child realizes that all the world is not like him and, for some reason, his difference is resented. This is a good story of a man with Negro blood who is white enough to pass and does so to his own advantage—and his secret torment.

The Invisible Man of Ellison is a novel written about a young Negro of sensitivity, character and education. The novel runs him through the gamut of the problems of a Negro youth, the duplicity of the Uncle Toms, the indifference or hostility of the white man, the desperation of the Black who leaves the rural South for the industrial North, the promises and disappointments of communism and so on. This excellent novel might be reserved for more capable readers as much of it is symbolical and mingled conscious and unconscious material.

Jean Toomer's *Cane,* also for the better reader, consists of a number of beautifully done character sketches unified by the theme of the sugar cane.

Go Tell It on the Mountain shows much of Baldwin's skill and artistry without emphasizing his interest in the homosexual as do *Another Country* or *Giovanni's Room.*

Less able readers would also enjoy *Not Without Laughter,* a gentle book showing the conflict between the older and younger generations of Negroes in reacting to the white man's world.

Richard Wright's *Native Son* is more typical of the novels from Black writers; it is a novel of violence and hopelessness spawned by the ghetto conditions into which Bigger Thomas is born and from which we are certain he cannot emerge victorious—and from which he does not. This book also gives some insight into the occasional tragedies that occur when well-meaning whites try to help without knowledge of the individual.

None of these novels is written from the Harlem era of Negro litera-

ture, the era when the Negro was glorified as the noble savage, the uninhibited child of Nature. This theme is in some of the excellent plays in *Five Plays* by Langston Hughes. This and Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun* will give you a well-rounded list from which to start.

I have mentioned only books with which I am familiar. Most of them are in paperback. If I do not mention a work, I may either be unfamiliar with it or have considered it not useful in a high-school class.

White teacher or Black teacher, White school or Black school, I hope you will instigate such a course or unit and that you will find it as rewarding to teach as I have.